

Criticism and Theory in the Visual Arts, Writing Enhanced
ARTS 4389 – 01,
3 Credit Hours
Spring Semester, 2018
Sam Houston State University

Class Meeting Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 – 10:50 a.m.

Class Location: Art Building F 107

Instructor: Dr. Melissa L. Mednicov

Office: Art Building E 116

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Phone: #294-4572

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 1:00-2:00 p.m. or by appointment.

Course Description: The study of historical and contemporary aspects of major thinking concerning the visual arts. Writing Enhanced. 3 credit hours. Prerequisites: ARTS 1301, ARTS 3385, and ARTS 4385 (or ARTS 4388).

A Further Elaboration: An examination of the history and literature of art criticism. Students consider important historical theorists and critics, with an emphasis on contemporary approaches to art. This course is divided into three sections. First, we will look briefly at the history of art criticism. Then, we will examine one of the art critic's tools: aesthetics. Finally, we will explore the theoretical frameworks that critics (and art historians) often employ in their discussions of art. Students will consider the changing role of the art critic, the ways in which taste and visual pleasure are defined (and sometimes negated), and how different theoretical frameworks may relate to art. The course will emphasize students' critical analysis and writing skills. Additionally, students will look critically by applying the theories and approaches that we read and discuss in class to artworks.

Course Objectives

After completing this course, students will be able to demonstrate:

1. knowledge of different theories, critical approaches, and scholarship in art history.
2. the ability to present information and analysis about different philosophical ideas and discuss them.
3. the ability to engage critically with different readings through writing analysis.

Learning Outcomes (3 of many): 1. Gaining a broader understanding and appreciation of intellectual/cultural activity (art, literature, etc.). 2. Developing a

skill in expressing oneself orally or in writing. 3. Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.

Assigned Essays/Text Selections: Students are responsible for readings every class. Articles and essays are posted on Blackboard or found through JSTOR. I will also direct students to contemporary art criticism that relates to readings or artworks discussed. This course is discussion based. My expectation of you as a student is that you will read the assigned essays before class and come to class prepared to discuss them. This does not mean that I expect you to come to class understanding every aspect of the essay, but that you come to class with questions and observations for class discussion. If you are having difficulty with a reading, bring particular passages into the class discussion. This is not a “lecture” class, but a class predicated upon lively discussion in a seminar setting.

Grade Distribution

Class Contributions/Participation: 20%

Short Papers (3-pages): 7 papers, each worth 10% of your grade (70% total)

Final Paper/Presentation (2-page paper and presentation): 10% (Each worth 5%)

Short Papers: Students write seven short papers. Students are graded for their analysis and understanding of the reading as well as their writing (grammar, organization, etc.). Students must write a full three pages (double-spaced, 12-point font). Short papers are due about every other week (please see the syllabus for due dates). Students may respond to any of the readings “in between” each deadline. Once a paper is handed back, students may visit the Writing Center and re-write their papers within one week. A strong paper will engage specifically with elements of the text.

Class Contributions/Participation: Students are assigned to begin our class discussions; they will bring in images of artworks that relate to the readings and questions to prompt discussion of the assigned readings. Students are welcome to meet with me if they want to go over materials beforehand. Class contributions and participation are a combined grade (as they are interrelated). I will give students feedback at various intervals on class contributions, especially if improvement is needed.

Final Paper/Presentation: Each student will meet with me to discuss their paper topic. We will find a critic or theorist that pertains to the student’s area of study, art practice, and/or research interests. Students will focus on one reading and then present this information and their analysis to the class.

Criteria for Grading Assessment: A: 100-90

B: 89-80

C: 79-70

D: 69-60 (passing, but not necessarily satisfying)

degree requirements)
F: 59 and below

Note: I will not post grades or discuss grades over email. However, you are always welcome to come to office hours or make an appointment to talk about the course, as well as how to improve.

Attendance Policy: You need to come to class in order to do well in this course. I will take attendance. Attendance relates to participation. Sleeping, texting, and not paying attention are all criteria under which a student may be marked absent even if they are in the classroom. Students may have up to three ***excused*** absences without it impacting their final grade. Any absence over three will result in your grade being lowered one letter grade. If you are absent 7 times and get an A on every assignment, you will still fail the course.

Policy on Lateness: Being late to class is disrespectful to both your professor and your peers. If you are late three times, it will count as an absence. This is cumulative. If you are late 6 times, you will be counted as absent twice. If you are over 20 minutes late for class, you will be counted as absent.

Makeup Policy: Papers are due the date assigned on the syllabus. Late papers and assignments will be lowered a grade every day that they are late (this, of course, includes weekends and any days of the week; not just “class days”). For example, an A paper turned in two days late will be marked as a C. If there is an emergency with you or a family member and you miss an assignment, you will need to provide an excuse through the Dean of Students. Certain projects (such as presentations) cannot be made up. If you miss class and we have an in-class assignment (or the day that you were to present), you cannot make that project up towards your participation grade.

Etiquette:

- *Please keep all cell phones turned off (that includes vibrate mode). If there is an emergency and you need to keep your cell phone on, see Dr. Mednicov before class.
- *Please do not text during class. I can see you, I promise.
- *Laptops are allowed for note taking. If it appears that students are using the Internet and not taking notes, this privilege may be revoked.
- *It is expected that all e-mails sent to Dr. Mednicov will be courteously worded and contain proper greetings and closings. Inappropriate e-mails will not be answered.
- *I expect all students to check their shsu.edu e-mail on a daily basis.

POLICIES REGARDING ACADEMIC DISHONESTY, STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AND STUDENT ABSENCES ON RELIGIOUS HOLY DAYS CAN BE FOUND AT
[HTTP://WWW.SHSU.EDU/SYLLABUS/](http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/)

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The University and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of academic dishonesty including but not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work which is to be submitted, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of resource materials. For a complete listing of the university policy, see: http://www.shsu.edu/~slo_www/

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES POLICY

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance should register with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Lee Drain Annex (telephone 936-294-3512, TDD 936-294-3786, and e-mail disability@shsu.edu). They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired.

SHSU adheres to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have a disability that may affect adversely your work in this class, then I encourage you to register with the SHSU Services for Students with Disabilities and to talk with me about how I can best help you. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential. NOTE: No accommodation can be made until you register with the Services for Students with Disabilities. For a complete listing of the university policy, see:

<http://www.shsu.edu/dept/academic-affairs/documents/aps/students/811006.pdf>

STUDENT ABSENCES ON RELIGIOUS HOLY DAYS POLICY

Section 51.911(b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Section 51.911 (a) (2) defines a religious holy day as: "a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20...." A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence.

University policy 861001 provides the procedures to be followed by the student and instructor. A student desiring to absent himself/herself from a scheduled class in order to observe (a) religious holy day(s) shall present to each instructor involved a written statement concerning the religious holy day(s). The instructor will complete a form notifying the student of a reasonable timeframe in which the missed assignments and/or examinations are to be completed. For a complete listing of the university policy, see:

http://www.shsu.edu/~vaf_www/aps/documents/861001.pdf

VISITORS IN THE CLASSROOM

Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

USE OF PHONE & TEXT MESSAGING IN THE CLASSROOM

Students will refrain from behavior in the classroom that intentionally or unintentionally disrupts the learning process and, thus impedes the mission of the university. Please turn off or mute your cellular phone and/or pager before class begins. Inappropriate behavior in the classroom shall result, minimally, in a directive to leave class or being reported to the Dean of Students for disciplinary action in accordance with university policy.

DEPARTMENT OF ART BFA REVIEW

The purpose of the BFA Review is to ensure that students have learned basic principles and techniques needed for advanced art courses.

All Art students must successfully complete all of the Art Foundation courses and the BFA Review before being accepted into a BFA program in Computer Animation, Photography, or Studio Art or Graphic Design. Graphic Design students must also pass a separate Graphic Design Review after the BFA Review.

The Art Foundation Courses are WASH, Drawing, and Foundations in Digital Art. (ARTS 1313, 1314, 1315, 1316, & 2313). Students must pass each course with a grade of C or higher to take the BFA Review and proceed to upper level courses.

The semester after all of the Foundation courses are complete, students must sign up for the BFA Review. Students should see an art advisor every semester to ensure they take the BFA Review on time. It should be taken the semester immediately following the completion of the Foundation Courses.

Students who do not pass the BFA Review may re-take it the following semester. Students who do not pass on the second attempt will not be allowed to continue as BFA majors, but may follow the degree plan for the BA in Art. Non-participation after signing up or being advised to sign up will count as a failure of that semester's review.

Graphic Design students must pass the BFA Review, complete Principles of Graphic Design (ARTS 2323) and participate in a BFA Review at the end of the semester that they are enrolled in Typography (ARTS 3322).

For more information on the BFA review see the Department of art web page:
<http://www.shsu.edu/academics/art/review/>

DEFACING UNIVERSITY PROPERTY

Do not paint on concrete, asphalt, trees, sides of buildings, interior walls or floors of buildings etc. When using any kind of paint use a drop cloth or tarp to protect the surface from overspray. Defacing university property is prohibited by university policy. Students will be held responsible for the cost of damages to the facilities.

Lecture and Reading Schedule (Subject to Change):

Section 1: What is Art Criticism?

Week 1

Thursday, January 18: First Day of Classes/Syllabus/Introductions

Week 2

Tuesday, January 23: An Introduction to Art Criticism

***Reading: James Elkins, "Art Criticism: Writing without Readers," *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 1-14. (Blackboard)

***Reading: Dave Hickey, "Some Things are Better Than Others," *Pirates and Farmers*, Ridinghouse, 2013, pp. 155-163. (Blackboard)

Thursday, January 25: Origins of Art Criticism: Charles Baudelaire

**Reading: Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon, 1964, pp. 1-40. (Blackboard)

Week 3

Tuesday, January 30: Aesthetics and a different moment in criticism

***Reading: Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," first published in *New Quarterly*, London, 1909. (Blackboard)

Thursday, February 1: Raising the Stakes of Art Criticism

***Reading: Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," first published in *Partisan Review*, New York, VI, no. 5, Fall 1939, pp. 34-49. (Blackboard)

****Paper 1 due in Class**

Section II: Aesthetics

Week 4

Tuesday, February 6: Tools of the Critic/Formalism

***Reading: Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," first published in *Forum Lectures* (Voices of America), Washington, D.C., 1960. (Blackboard)

Thursday, February 8: The Sublime

***Reading: Edmund Burke, Selections from *A Philosophical Inquiry* (1757), Oxford, 1990. (Blackboard)

Week 5

Tuesday, February 13: The Beautiful

***Reading: Immanuel Kant, Selections from "Analytic of the Beautiful," *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Oxford, 2007 (Blackboard)

***Reading: A.O. Scott, "The Eye of the Beholder" (43-56), *Better Living Through Criticism*, Penguin Books, 2016 (Blackboard)

Thursday, February 15: Deconstructing the Aesthetic

***Reading: Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," (selections) from *Truth in Painting*. (Blackboard)

*****Paper 2 Due in Class**

Week 6

Tuesday, February 20: The Aesthetic of Cute

***Reading: Frances Richard, "Fifteen Theses on the Cute, *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 4, (Fall 2001), n.p. (<http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/cute.php>)

Thursday, February 22: In-Class Learning Activity

Week 7

Tuesday, February 27: Camp

Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," (1966) from *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Picador, 2001. (Blackboard)

Thursday, March 1: Aesthetics of the Cool

***Reading: Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," (orig. 1973), reprinted in Bill Beckley, ed., *Uncontrollable Beauty*, (NY: Allworth Press, 1988), pp. 371-398. (Blackboard. Also available on JSTOR)

*****Paper 3 Due in Class**

Week 8

Tuesday, March 6: The Ugly

***Reading: Umberto Eco, "Introduction" and "Ugliness Today" from *On Ugliness*, translated by Alastair McEwan, Rizzoli, 2007. (Blackboard)

Thursday, March 8: The Uncanny

***Reading: Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny." (Blackboard)

Week 9: Spring Break

Tuesday, March 13: Classes Cancelled/Spring Break

Wednesday, March 15: Classes Cancelled/Spring Break

Section III: Theoretical Frameworks

Week 10

Tuesday, March 20: Taste and Class

***Reading: Selections from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, transl. Richard Nice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). (Blackboard)

*****Paper 4 Due in Class**

Thursday, March 22: The Aura and the Object/Art as Commodity

***Reading: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1985). (Blackboard)

You must have a topic for your final paper/presentation by Thursday, March 22nd

Week 11

Tuesday, March 27: Feminist Theory

***Reading: Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (Blackboard)

***Reading: Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes," posted on May 26, 2015, *Art News* (Blackboard)

Thursday, March 29: Queer Theory

Reading: Catherine Lord, "Inside the Body Politic: 1980 – present," from *Art & Queer Culture*, New York: Phaidon Press, 2013. (Blackboard)

****Paper 5 Due in Class**

Week 12

Tuesday, April 3: Identity and Art

***Reading: Charles Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism" from *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, exh. catalogue, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993. (Blackboard)

***Reading: "Lives of Others: John Tain on 'The Theater of Refusal' (1993)", *Art Forum*, Summer 2016: 157 (Blackboard)

***Suggested Reading: Roundtable Discussion of artists, writers, and curators for "The Theater of Refusal" (Blackboard)

Thursday, April 5: Film Theory

***Reading: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." (Blackboard)

Week 13

Tuesday, April 10: Postmodernism

***Reading: Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October*, Vol. 13 (Summer, 1980): 58-80 (Blackboard)

*****Paper 6 Due in Class**

Thursday, April 12: What is Real? The Simulacrum

***Reading: Jean Baudrillard, Selections from "The Precession of Simulacra" from *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994 (originally published in 1981): 1-14 (Blackboard)

Week 14

Tuesday, April 17: Postcolonial Theory and Globalization

***Reading: Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," from *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 552-569. (Blackboard)

Thursday, April 19: Museums, Galleries, and Exhibitions

***Reading: Maura Reilly, "What is Curatorial Activism?," *Art News*, published November 7, 2017. (Blackboard)

***Reading: "Expose Yourself to More Art with These Tips from Kimberly Drew," interview with Kimberly Drew, by Dominique Hobdy, *Essence.com* (Blackboard)

*****Paper 7 Due in Class**

Week 15

Tuesday, April 24: What Are You Reading About Art?

***Readings: to be determined by the class. Students must post their chosen reading for the class on Blackboard **by Friday, April 20 at 5 pm.**

Thursday, April 26: Paper Presentations

Week 16

Tuesday, May 1: Paper Presentations

Thursday, May 3: Paper Presentations/Last Class

Final Paper Due on Thursday, May 3.

No Final Exam.